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## Avian Haven Golden Eagle 2014

Avian Haven

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# AVIAN HAVEN Wild Bird Rehabilitation Center



## Golden Eagle

Admitted  
December 29, 2013

Released  
April 2, 2014



Photos are by Glori Berry  
unless otherwise credited.



On the afternoon of December 29, 2013, Kerrin Erhard and her son, Blake, were cross-country skiing on Ovens Mouth Preserve in Boothbay. Blake had been well ahead of his mother when he suddenly stopped, took off his skis and ran back toward her, telling her there was an eagle sitting on the trail. The bird spread its wings and walked toward the woods as they approached. Kerrin and Blake continued skiing along the trail, eventually turning around and returning the way they had come.

Meanwhile, the eagle had walked back out of the woods; she was again near the trail, in roughly the same location as previously, and not looking well. Kerrin phoned her husband, Lincoln, who in turn called us. We in turn called Boothbay area Animal Control Officer Betsy Pratt, who dropped everything to prepare for a woods rescue of what was believed to be an immature Bald Eagle. She and her husband David met the Erhards; they all hiked about 100 yards into the woods to where the bird had last been seen.





The bird was in exactly the same spot. With Betsy standing by with a blanket, David carefully approached the bird with a catch-pole.



It was not difficult to secure the weak bird; David soon had her wrapped safely in the blanket.





David carried her in his arms out to the road, and got her into a crate; then Betsy drove to Wiscasset, where she met our volunteer transporter Carol Jones. Carol drove the bird here, arriving just before dark.





As soon as Carol arrived with the bird, Marc and Terry unscrewed the top of the carrier without looking inside.



There was a collective gasp all around as the top came off and Terry grasped the bird. It was not the immature Bald Eagle we'd been expecting - but rather, a Golden Eagle.



Differences between the two species are shown on the next two slides.

Although Golden Eagles lack the distinctive white head and tail of an adult Bald Eagle, it is easy to confuse a first-year Bald with a Golden, especially at a distance. Close up, however, and regardless of age, one striking difference can be seen in the legs.



A Golden Eagle's legs are covered with small, dense, tawny-colored feathers all the way down to the beginning of the toes. They look more like fur than feathers.

A Bald Eagle's lower legs are bare, though when the bird is standing, the legs will be partially covered by longer feathers that look more like "trousers" than the "leggings" of the Golden Eagle.







In a first-year Bald, the head feathers are dark, and the beak is uniformly black.



Other differences between first-year Bald and Golden Eagles are in the head and face. Again, they may be difficult to discern at a distance or in poor lighting.



The Golden has tawny plumage on the head, and the cere (area around the nostrils at the base of the beak) is yellow.



The newly-arrived Golden felt very thin, weighed only 3.2 kg (about 7 pounds), and was covered with dried mud. We worked quickly, taking an x-ray, drawing blood, spraying the feather lice on her head, and tubing her fluids.



We settled her into a hospital cage, developed the x-ray, and started the blood work.

The x-ray looked normal, but the blood parameters indicated a state of severe debilitation and anemia. Equally worrisome, her blood lead level was elevated. It was not dangerously high, however, and we opted to postpone chelation therapy until we knew the bird was stable.

We were not confident that she would live the night. But she did, and droppings on the floor the next morning gave us the good news that her GI tract was working!





On the 30<sup>th</sup>, she still had an impressive crop of feather lice; we treated them again.



We photographed the bird's plumage and measured the length of primary flight feathers. Despite the bird's low weight, the wing chord indicated a female, and the plumage was characteristic of a hatch-year bird.

We tube-fed her for the remainder of the day. She had a heavy parasite load, which we treated, and there was some blood in her droppings.

Ophthalmologist Steve Witkin gave her an eye exam on the 31st, and pronounced the eyes undamaged.



Blood work on Jan. 1 indicated a worsening anemia; concerned about a possible secondary rodenticide exposure in addition to lead, we administered a treatment for internal hemorrhage.



An attempted transition to solid foods over the next few days was difficult. We started out giving her "pinkie" mice; she would eat them rather tentatively, then vomit. She lost a little weight, dropping down to 2.9 kg. We went back to tubing high-calorie liquid slurries at least once a day.



Her appetite improved dramatically on January 4, when we gave her a muskrat rather than mice to eat. Her fondness for this particular food never waned; the photos below were taken a few days later, on January 7.



January 7 was a real "turn around" day. Her weight was up to nearly 4 kg, and blood work revealed an improvement in the anemia. It was time to wash some of the mud off her feathers.





Some of our favorite "portrait" photos were taken on January 10.



On January 13, she was moved to an outdoor flight cage for some fresh air.



She tried out several perches, pausing to preen on each one.







Having moved to a different perch, she continues to preen - seemingly oblivious to Glori's presence.

More January 13:  
Glori's camera  
catches her blinking  
(her nictitating  
membranes look  
blue) and vocalizing.



Then back on the stump, she devours a rat. She did not attempt to fly, however, and we brought her back inside for the night.





The next day, January 14, she was due for a follow-up parasite check; it was positive, and we gave her a second treatment. She threw up afterward, so we decided to keep her indoors for a day or two. The bird seemed content to be back in her previous housing. Her voracious appetite soon returned, and we were happy to see continuing weight gain. Starting on the 16<sup>th</sup>, we put her outdoors during the day, but brought her in at night to help conserve her energy through periods of colder temperatures.



The postponed round of chelation therapy was begun on the 18<sup>th</sup>. A few days later, on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, her weight was up to 4.8 kg, and we began leaving her outside overnight. On the 23<sup>rd</sup>, she flew up to a medium-height perch!



Blood work on January 27 looked good; the anemia had completely resolved, and her blood lead level was close to zero. Out in the flight cage, she could make it to the high places, but did so via perches of intermediate heights, rather than fly directly up top from the ground.



From up high, she would cock her head sideways to look at a caregiver on the ground. Photos taken on January 30 were the first to show this characteristic pose.



February 4: Sunlight through the slats on the opposite side of the habitat creates a shadow pattern across her back.



## February 4: Muskrat lunch!





More February 4: After that heavy meal, she goes for a high perch, but can't quite make it.



Letting go,  
she drops  
back down  
safely.



But less than two weeks later, she has mastered the 40-foot flight cage, and on February 16, we move her into the flyway. She can fly directly from the ground to the highest perches.





## February 20: Up Top in the Flyway



It's time for some preening!







March 4: Though she is usually seen up high . . .



. . . we sometimes find her exploring at ground level.



March 17: As usual,  
she cocks her head  
while observing  
activity down below.







She sometimes seems restless, walking the high perches almost as if pacing. Her current weight is 5.8 kg, nearly 13 pounds. We think she is ready for release.





Golden Eagles are an endangered species in Maine, so Charlie Todd, Endangered Species Biologist with the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, will take the lead on release plans.

As described in [this DIFW page](#), residency of Golden Eagles in Maine dates back at least to the mid 1700s, but the last record of the species nesting in Maine was in 1997. An international Eastern Golden Eagle Working Group recently published a commentary on the current status of this population; as noted in the publication, threats include lead poisoning (from ingestion of spent ammunition from hunter-shot game) and collisions with wind turbine blades.

Only a few Golden Eagles are seen in Maine each year. Charlie suggests a release location in western Maine where other Golden Eagles have been winter visitors. This area is along a likely spring migration corridor for other Golden Eagles heading north toward Quebec and the Gaspé Peninsula region, and is only a few miles away from an historic nest site. Migration time is . . . NOW!

Charlie also tells us that only six Golden Eagles have been recovered in Maine during the last 40 years; our bird will be the first successful release.





This is the last photo taken at Avian Haven, moments before her capture for the car trip to the release site.

The last two weeks of March were frustrating; there were back-to-back storms, rarely with more than a day in between. We wanted a window of 2-3 days of good weather. Each time we thought we found that window in a long-range forecast, it closed before it arrived. But FINALLY, the first week of April looked good!

In consideration of the bird's status and the privacy of the property owners, it had been decided that the release would be a low-key event with no advance publicity and limited attendance. The people involved would include regional wildlife biologist Chuck Hulsey, New Hampshire Audubon biologist Chris Martin, the property owners (who wish to remain anonymous), and Marc and Terry from Avian Haven (who would drive with the bird).



Glori has netted the bird; she carries her up to Terry's truck, where Marc helps her secure the bird in a crate for travel.





## The Release Area





Marc, Terry and the bird have ridden with Chuck for the last half of the trip. They meet Chris and the property owners at the release site.



There is some discussion about where to place the crate. When a decision has been reached, Chuck sets his video camera.



When everything is ready, the crate is unloaded from the truck bed, and carried to the location.



Chuck checks the remote control on the video camera, while Marc removes the screws that hold the top and the bottom of the crate together.







Chuck is still wearing his snowshoes, but the people opening the crate are nearly knee-deep in soft snow.



Out she goes!



She flies well, but is staying low to the ground. It is soon apparent that she is going to land.







Accustomed to the hard-packed snow in the flyway, she must be surprised when the soft snow barely supports her weight as she lands.



She gets to her feet quickly and shakes off.

She spends several minutes on the ground, looking in all directions.





And then raising her powerful wings high, she gets enough lift on the down-stroke to pull her feet out of the soft snow. It's all easy from there.









Flying high now, she banks  
around, heading for tall pines.





She lands in one of them.



Suddenly another bird appears in the sky! An immature (likely 4<sup>th</sup> year) Bald Eagle seems to be checking out the Golden. The Bald flies toward the pine tree where the Golden is perched.





And the Golden turns her head to watch the Bald fly past, behind the tree.





She remains in the tree for a few more minutes, looking around intently.





And then, once again, she is off.











These were our last images of her; seconds later, she had turned a corner, and disappeared from sight. Although a feeding station had been provided for her, she did not stay in the release area, and was not seen there again. Of course, a hope had been that she would remain in what was once a homeland for her species. But perhaps once those great wings caught the wind, her instincts could not help but take her north toward Quebec. We imagine her already there.



We formed new friendships and renewed older ones in our journey with this remarkable

bird. We thank Kerrin, Lincoln & Blake Erhard, Betsy & David Pratt, and Carol & Bob Jones for rescuing and transporting the bird; Charlie Todd and Chuck Hulsey (MEDIFW) for consultations and release arrangements; plus of course the release site host and hostess, whom we hope we might see again some day on a similar occasion.





Avian Haven is a non-profit corporation whose operating expenses are funded by individual/business donations and foundation grants. Contrary to some media reports about this bird, no state revenue was directed toward her care.



In addition to people involved with the rescue and release of this Golden Eagle, we gratefully acknowledge the support provided in between those two events, during her three-month recuperation here. Both cash and in-kind donations from a variety of sources

helped cover the expenses associated with her recovery. A great many hours of unpaid volunteer time were also part of her care package. On behalf of the bird, we thank the many supporters of Avian Haven who, behind the scenes, made her recovery possible.

